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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Center Shouldn't Hold

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IT'S just a red stake stuck in an anonymous spread of pasture 20 miles north of Belle Fourche, S.D., a rodeo town of about 5,000 inhabitants. But it is also the geographical center of the United States of America, as defined by the National Geodetic Survey in 1959. Or at least it is for now.

To find it, says Teresa Schanzenbach, executive director of the town's chamber of commerce, "you have go into a ditch, cross a barbed-wire fence and maneuver amongst the cactus and cow pies." So, plans are that in August, the center of the nation is to be moved 20 miles south, and an eye-catching granite monument will be unveiled in Belle Fourche itself so that visitors can see it more easily.

This may seem like a high-handed way to treat both geography and the United States itself. Certainly the implications reach well beyond Belle Fourche. Is the balance of the nation going to be affected? Will there be a seismic tilt towards Canada? And can we be sure that the center won't shift again? History certainly suggests that it will — and within the foreseeable future.

The event that made Belle Fourche the focal point of the nation's land mass was the admission of Hawaii and Alaska in 1959. Never have the frontiers of the United States remained fixed for so long.

From the Treaty of Paris in 1783 that pushed the frontier of the union to the Mississippi River, expansionism has been the driving force in American history. The roll call of increase is familiar — the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the acquisition of Florida and the Gulf Coast in 1819, the annexation of Texas in 1845, the Oregon Treaty in 1846 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in which Mexico gave up much of the Southwest, two years later.

Naturally the geographical center snaked westward in step. From the District of Columbia, the Belle Fourche of its day as the midpoint of the 13 original states, it jumped in 1803 to Columbus, Ky., where the inhabitants decided to create a magnificent wide-avenued grid beside the Mississippi in the expectation that their town would become the nation's new capital. Before a brick could be laid, however, the center had moved south to Tennessee, then west to the Ozarks, and by 1859 John Gilpin, the governor of Colorado, felt able to suggest that a point near Omaha should become “the cardinal basis for the future empire now erecting itself upon the North American continent.”

By rights, the frontiers of this anticipated empire would have enclosed both Canada and Central America. “I look off on Canada,” confessed William H. Seward, soon to be Lincoln's secretary of state, “and see there an ingenious, enterprising and ambitious people ... and I am able to say, ‘It is very well, you are building excellent states to be hereafter admitted into the American Union.’ I can look southwest and see amid all the convulsions that are breaking the Spanish-American republics, the preparatory stage for their re-organization in free, equal and self-governing members of the United States of America.”

That this exalted vision should have ground to a halt with Seward's purchase of Alaska and the later annexation of Hawaii ensured that the geographical center would migrate no further than to a field in South Dakota. But before the inhabitants of Belle Fourche invest too much money in a permanent monument, they should consider whether the age of expansionism is indeed over. In particular they might cast a wary glance at the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America,

which was created in 2005 by President Bush and counterparts in Mexico and Canada.

Anti-immigration drum-beaters like CNN's Lou Dobbs and Representative Virgil Goode, a Virginia Republican, routinely portray the partnership as a threat to United States sovereignty. They like to cite an early recommendation by the Council on Foreign Relations, an independent body despite its official-sounding title, that by 2010 the partnership should lead to "a North American economic and security community" enclosed within a shared "outer security perimeter."

True, such a plan would require the creation of several supranational agencies — a North American commission to establish regulations harmonizing the economic and security policies of the three nations, a North American secretariat to monitor their observance, and a North American court to enforce their compliance. One of the oft-repeated talking points for critics of the partnership is that its purpose is to "remove sovereignty from the United States and give it to a North American union similar to the European Union."

The Bush administration dismisses such claims as "conspiracy theories," "myths" and "lies." It created a Web site to inform the public that the partnership is not an agreement or a treaty but a "dialogue" to help reduce barriers to trade and enhance security against a terrorist attack; that the Council on Foreign Relations has no official standing; that no plans exist for a supposed superhighway from Mexico; that no North American Union is contemplated; and above all that "the S.P.P. does not attempt to modify our sovereignty or currency or change the American system of government designed by our founding fathers."

All of which would seem clear enough — were it not for the intriguing report issued in February by the partnership's entirely official North American Competitiveness Council, made up of leaders from the region's largest companies, including General Motors, Wal-Mart, Chevron and United Parcel Service. Among some 50 proposals, the council recommended a common "North American customs clearance

system” by 2010, a “trilateral tax treaty” and the establishment of a “North American standard” as the “default approach” for regulations in all three countries covering food, agriculture, manufacturing, transport and intellectual property rights. Their recommendations are expected to be taken up when President Bush, President Felipe Calderón of Mexico and Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada meet next month.

Is there any way of reconciling this clear route to supranational regulation of economic and social policies with the denial that it will diminish United States sovereignty? Actually, there is.

Unlike the European Union, where six large nations jostle for power with 21 others of varying size, any North American model would inevitably be dominated by the partner whose population and economy are respectively almost three and six times bigger than those of the other two put together. It is significant that even at this early stage, all Security and Prosperity Partnership agreements have involved the United States, although often excluding one of the other two partners, and that American regulations are the norm for most of the partnership’s 24 existing bilateral and trilateral agreements covering trade and security.

In other words, folks like Mr. Dobbs and Representative Goode are facing in the wrong direction. The partnership is increasing rather than diminishing the scope of United States sovereignty. History is resuming its normal course. It may be slower than invasion or purchase, but the regulations and agencies needed to enforce them will pull Canada and Mexico within the reach of United States jurisdiction as effectively as any means that Seward envisioned. Meanwhile, the citizens of Belle Fourche would be well advised to make the new geographical center of the United States transportable. It may eventually need to travel to somewhere near Omaha.

Andro Linklater is the author of “The Fabric of America: How Our Borders and Boundaries Shaped the Country and Forged Our National Identity.”

